

## Narrative sense-making and prospective social action: methodological challenges and new directions

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Special issue editorial:

# **Narrative sense-making and prospective social action: methodological challenges and new directions**

Ditte Andersen, Signe Ravn & Rachel Thomson

## **Introduction**

I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’

(MacIntyre 2013 [1981], 250)

The ways in which humans narratively make sense of their lives shape how they navigate the future. At least, that is what prominent philosophers like Sartre, Ricoeur and MacIntyre proposed. Philosophically this idea has roots in the long-standing thesis of mimesis; like art imitates life and life imitates art in the Aristotelian sense, so do life and stories imitate each other (Bruner 1987). Despite the tenacity of the idea, relatively little research has explored the relationship empirically. How does narrative sense-making shape prospective social action? How can we best study the interplay between stories told and lives lived? What kind of methodologies can provide the means for social scientists to address questions concerning the future? In this special issue of *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* we turn our attention to these challenges in recognition of how fundamentally important these questions are. If stories actually shape what we do, then not only individual life trajectories but also collective futures depend upon it.

Narrative research is an international and interdisciplinary enterprise that has been thriving since the narrative turn in the 1980s (Polletta et al 2011). Central in narrative research is a focus on the role of narratives as sense-making tools with the capacity to produce, challenge and change the identities of individuals as well as collectives (Holstein & Gubrium 2011, Kerby 1991). Methodologically, these studies often rely on research interviews as sites for the construction of identities (Presser 2004). To give an example, a study using interview data showed how a woman experiencing domestic violence may achieve an identity as a survivor rather than a victim through a narrative reconstruction (Riessman 1989). More generally, studies in this tradition tend to emphasise how it is through narratives and narrativity – the principles and structures of storytelling – that we constitute our social identities (Somers 1994, Bruner 1990, Ochs & Capps 2001).

Another strand of narrative research is characterised by a focus on the situated practices and social contexts of storytelling. Methodologically, this orientation privileges ethnographic approaches that thrust the narrative researcher into “the scenes of storytelling” (Gubrium & Holstein 2008, 250) to investigate how stories are produced and used in local contexts (Polletta et al 2011). For example, an ethnographic study showed how practices of institutional storytelling in drug

treatment produced gendered shame targeting female clients (Andersen 2015). In general, studies in this tradition tend to emphasise how narrative sense-making is an interactional achievement situated in particular social and local contexts without ignoring individual narrative selves (Järvinen 2004).

Contemporary narrative research continues to advance our understanding of narrative identities (e.g. MacAdams 2019, Mattingly 2013) as well as practices of storytelling (e.g. De Fina 2016, Tutenges 2019). While these endeavors remain vital, we argue for the need for a new focus within narrative research; one that further explores the relationship between narrative sense-making and prospective social action. An exploration of this relationship requires methodological innovation. More conventional traditions of qualitative interviewing, document analysis and ethnographic fieldwork are well-suited to produce data to study narrative identities and the practice of storytelling; however, empirical investigations of the dynamic relationship between narratives and social action in a broad sense, not just the social practice of storytelling, require scholars to rethink research designs and analytical approaches. To facilitate this innovation, we gathered leading narrative scholars to an international symposium in Copenhagen in June 2018 to encourage collective thinking on how we might approach the challenge of researching narrative sense-making and prospective social action<sup>1</sup>. Scholars from different fields and disciplines were gathered to share and respond to each other's work, and this special issue – which builds on the seminar – contributes to the interdisciplinary conversation.

The articles in this special issue have very different takes on how to research narrative sense-making and prospective social action and this multitude of insights reflects diverse methodological and disciplinary approaches. That narrative has been taken up by different disciplines is both a strength and a challenge. As knowledge communities operationalise the concept in radically different ways we come to ask whether there is anything 'essential' about narrative. For example, the humanist traditions treat narrative as a hermeneutic structure, dynamically linking past, present and future. In contrast, within positivist traditions, narrative may be subject to quantitative methodologies or experimental investigations that seek to 'pin down' what narrative is. And finally, post-humanist approaches may reject the privileged position of meaning-making by individuals altogether. Work in feminist sociology has encouraged us to look carefully at ideas and structures that connect knowledge communities. Niamh Moore (2016), for example, has suggested that 'the archive' could be considered as a 'boundary object' that brings together and allows interaction between different disciplines. Moore draws on the work of Susan Leigh Star (2010) whose concept of the boundary object alerts us to the way that an idea or structure is shared by a number of communities of practice, but understood and deployed differently. In parallel with this, we suggest that 'narrative' not only constitutes a meeting point for different disciplines, but also for popular and lay audiences.

One of the defining features of a boundary object in Star's definition is its interpretive flexibility. Hence, our aim is not to create a single definition or to resolve differing understandings, but to work with this flexibility. Star also suggests that "boundary objects are a sort of arrangement that allows different groups to work together without consensus" (Star 2010, p. 602). This is very helpful for our aims in this special issue. Instead of trying to align different disciplinary and

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methodological approaches we explore what happens when these different approaches meet, how they can inform each other and what new questions emerge from this.

In the remainder of this editorial we first set the scene for the papers that follow by positioning the special issue in the context of the existing literature on narrative and prospective action. We then introduce the papers elucidating themes that connect them.

## Researching futures

Narratives configure *pasts* and project *futures* from the perspectives of the *present* (Mead 1959). Time and life itself are thus entwined with human temporality, and narratives interlock in what Ricoeur (1981) conceptualises as *emplotment*. In the empirical social sciences, narrative research has produced rich insights on how humans interpret past events from situated present perspectives (Järvinen 2001, Ochs & Capps 2001, Plummer 2002, Presser 2008), while up until recently there has been comparatively less research focusing on imagined futures (see e.g., Carabelli & Lyon 2016; Cuzzocrea & Mandich 2016, Järvinen & Ravn 2015, Sools et al 2017; Ravn 2019). Few studies investigate whether these projected futures actually eventuate.

In the burgeoning field of prospection science (Gilbert & Wilson 2007), researchers use experiments to determine the extent to which people actually do what they imagine doing (Spreng & Levine 2013). Research in this experimental tradition tends to study neural aspects of imagining the future (e.g. how the frontal regions in the brain are activated) and examine behavioural aspects in laboratory settings to establish whether or not intended actions are executed. The research pivots around matters such as ‘errors of prospection’ (Gilbert & Wilson 2007), e.g., how people use unrepresentative memories to imagine the future, and questions focus on whether an imagined action, for instance going to Scotland to climb hills (Spreng & Levine 2013), happens or not. These studies fall outside narrative research paradigms, as they do not address the narrative aspects of how humans use *emplotment* to make sense of their lives and imagine future selves, but rather approach actions “independently of intentions, beliefs and settings” (MacIntyre 2013, 241).

The research agenda we raise in this special issue is not about assessing errors or inaccuracies in individuals’ future imaginations. Through the concepts of ‘narrative sense-making and social action’ we forefront the human production of meaning in both stories and deeds. Following Paul Atkinson and Amanda Coffey, we embark from the assumption that “social life is performed and narrated, and we need to recognize the performative qualities of social life and talk. In doing so, we shall not find it necessary to juxtapose talk and events as if they occupied different spheres of meaning” (Atkinson & Coffey 2003, 416). Thus, for us, the question is not first and foremost whether or not an imagined action, such as going to Scotland to climb hills, happens or not; rather, we want to know how a narrative may construct and enact such future actions as meaningful.

In studies of narrative sense-making in everyday lives, the question of how narratives are embedded in social contexts and geographical locations has been central (Thomson et al 2002). Through qualitative longitudinal designs scholars have illuminated complex and dynamic interplays between narratives and social actions in unfolding lives (Plumridge & Thomson 2003, Ravn 2019, Andersen 2019, see also previous Special Issues of this journal (vol. 6(3), vol. 18(3)). For example,

scholars have showed how daily experiences of structural constraints may or may not spur narrative change in the ways individuals make sense of their pasts and orient themselves towards their future (Harding et al 2016).

For the purposes of this Special Issue, we highlight two pioneering bodies of work that have sought to address how narrative sense-making links with prospective social action. First, in medical anthropology, Cheryl Mattingly has demonstrated how patients and health care professionals locate themselves in unfolding stories that guide them in questions about what to do (Mattingly 1998, 2010, 2014, Mattingly & Garro 2000). Through close ethnographic observations of everyday interaction in a hospital setting, Mattingly shows how Ricoeur's ideas on narrative configuration play out in practice as actors in the midst of acting work to create a plot out of a succession of actions (Mattingly 1994). She thus reveals the narrative structure of action in hospital settings: "Stories are everywhere in the hospital, and they [...] have powerful consequences upon how the present is experienced and what future actions seem most reasonable, likely, or appropriate" (Mattingly 2010, p. 52).

Second, in criminology, Lois Presser (2009) coined the term narrative criminology and developed it with Sveinung Sandberg (Presser & Sandberg 2015, Sandberg 2010, 2013, Presser 2018) to advance our understanding of how certain narratives make harmful actions or desistance from harmful actions more likely. Theoretically, narrative criminology also takes inspiration from the philosophy of Ricoeur, especially his idea that narrative shapes experience in a constitutive sense as experience is always understood and acted upon in storied ways (Presser & Sandberg 2015, 4). Methodologically, narrative criminologists employ qualitative interviews (e.g. Fleetwood 2015, Sandberg, Copes and Tutenges 2015), ethnographic fieldwork (e.g. Ugelvik 2015, Tutenges 2019) as well as visual methods (Copes & Ragland 2016) to scrutinise the meaning of offenders' narratives and relate it to future actions.

Reviewing previous research it becomes clear that empirical investigations of the link between narrative and prospective social action seem to favour longitudinal research designs (Holland, Thomson & Henderson, 2004). This is in some ways not surprising – longitudinal research may seem like the obvious choice for investigations of how narrative meaning-making at Time 1 relates to action at Time 2. As Thomson & McLeod argue, qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) is not just "a bundle of research strategies that .. mark out time" but rather involves a "processual imaginary" that is at once "a sensibility" and "an ontological and epistemological project" (2015, p. 247). A particular feature of this processual imaginary is how it allows "a fluidity of movement between units of analysis, scales and the particular and general" (ibid., p. 246). The potential to zoom in to consider the particularities of a narrative and to zoom out to understand the patterns emerging from large numbers of cases is a feature of QLR that is also exploited in a number of the papers gathered in this special issue – as is the facility to move about in time, juxtaposing different moments.

However, as will become apparent when engaging with the articles in this Special Issue, longitudinal methods are not the only way to approach the relation between narrative and prospective action. The contributions include qualitative, quantitative as well as mixed methods approaches, and they engage with a variety of data materials that go beyond interview data to also include written

texts (letters and social media status updates) and visual materials. It becomes clear that with different methods so different questions become relevant or take analytical precedence. For instance, while the question of ‘what will happen’ – predicting future actions – seems to be a key concern in analyses of cross-sectional data, this appears to be of lesser interest in completed longitudinal studies. Here ‘what will happen’ is already known, and the analytical questions instead concern *why* this happened. Tensions between a prospective guessing and retrospective meaning making are characteristic of papers in the special issue, highlighting how different understandings of ‘the future’ are in play. While for some authors ‘the future’ is simply uncertain or a “known unknown”; that which we cannot know (Uprichard 2011), for others it is something we can approach as it is enacted in the present and for others again it may be measured or predicted. We can also think of ‘futures past’; futures that have already been, in the sense of longitudinal research where both T1 and T2 have passed. This reminds us to distinguish between the life of the data/research project and the life of our research participants.

As we now turn to the papers included in this Special Issue, we also want to emphasise what McLeod & Thomson call ‘the indivisibility of past-present-future’ (McLeod & Thomson 2009, p. 8). While we are focusing on narrative and prospective social action, we are not arguing for separating out futures from past and present and studying these in isolation. These three dimensions, or timescapes (Adam 2004, p. 143) are bound up with each other. Focusing on future social action, as we do in this Special Issue, therefore means relating this to past and present and to meaning-making across different time-scapes.

### **The papers in this special issue**

In the first paper, Susie Pearce, Faith Gibson, Jeremy Whelan and Daniel Kelly study the relationship between narrative sense-making and prospective social action in the lives of young people who face the risk of untimely death due to cancer. The paper contributes with a demonstration of the usefulness of visual and psychosocial methodologies for studies of narrative sense-making and prospective social action in the context of radical forms of future uncertainty. In the face of life-threatening disease, humans use narrative sense-making to create order, explore emotions and search for meaning and connection to others (Bury, 1982, Kleinman 1988, Riessman, 2008, Williams, 2000). However, as Pearce and colleagues make clear, narrative sense-making is no easy undertaking for young people in cancer treatment. Visual and psychosocial methodologies are especially useful in this context as they facilitate a sensitivity towards stories that are not (yet) possible to articulate. For example, one young man struggled to verbalise the fear and anguish he experienced directly in interviews, but the use of photographs enabled him to share an overwhelming feeling of ‘*bleak unending nothingness*’. The narratives of another young man pivoted around future plans to travel Europe to regain a sense of freedom and independence. Due to a progression of cancer, the extended journey was reformulated as ‘a few days in Amsterdam’. In a narrative research paradigm, the question forefronted is not whether an imagined action is carried out or not but rather how the imagined action is constructed and reconstructed as meaningful. In this sense, telling stories of desired futures may be risky for young people with cancer as narratives can call attention to the gap between expectations and experiences. On the other hand, without stories of desired futures one might stare into a ‘*bleak*

*unending nothingness*'. Hence, Pearce and colleagues call our attention to the relationship between narrative, social action and the making of possible futures in a context where the future itself is precarious.

In the second paper, Cigdem Esin and Aura Lounasmaa delve into the potential of narrative sense-making as social acts of resistance in the 'Jungle'; the unrecognized refugee camp in Calais. The paper contributes with a methodological consideration of how the principle of 'ethical hesitancy' (Kofoed & Staunæs, 2015) enabled practitioners and researchers to facilitate creative, relational and safe spaces for refugee-storytellers while avoiding to enforce rapid interventions and point to the 'right' story from a privileged position. Esin & Lounasmaa explore how narrative sense-making works as a 'slow resistance' through reflecting on workshops they facilitated in the camp where participants were invited to tell stories different than the ones otherwise often rendered mandatory for refugees. Refugees are repeatedly asked to narrate specific parts of their lives as part of an assessment of their claims for safety, respect and human rights. In the narration process linked to legal claims for asylum, the content and form are strict, and the act of narration is scrutinised for consistency and plausibility (Millibank, 2009). In contrast, the workshops enabled the participants to tell their own stories through various modalities, including digital photographing. In the paper, the authors offer examples to demonstrate how refugee-storytellers use narrative sense-making in different ways to question and re-interpret the 'Jungle'. In one example, a storyteller accentuated his ability to find beauty in the camp using a photograph to demonstrate this. The narrative is interpreted as an act of slow resistance in a context where popular media stories tended to facilitate 'othering' of the refugees by presenting the camp as a dirty, dangerous and inhuman place. In this way, Esin & Lounasmaa draw our attention to how refugee-storytellers themselves engage with narrative sense-making as acts of resistance in a context where other stories, such as those disseminated through mass media, act upon humans in extremely vulnerable positions.

In the third paper, Stefan Bastholm Andrade and Ditte Andersen investigate the relationship between narrative sense-making and prospective social action through a new methodology termed Digital Story Telling (DSG). The paper contributes with a demonstration of the methodology's potential by applying it to an archived, qualitative longitudinal data set made up of successive interviews with young people conducted over time (the TimeScapes study in the UK). While the authors of the first two papers engage directly with their participants' stories, Andrade & Andersen work with the narratives through a 'distant reading' (Moretti 2013) facilitated by computerized text analysis. The DSG methodology works through an algorithm developed by the first author that identifies narrative units consisting of subjects, verbs, and objects. The methodology allows researchers to simultaneously zoom in on patterns in narratives and to zoom out to examine how these patterns relate to social structures such as gender and social class. For example, the DSG analysis of the Timescapes interviews demonstrates that young people with middle class backgrounds more often positioned themselves as subjects in narrative units while young people with working class backgrounds more often positioned themselves as the objects of others' agency, either that of other people or of structural forces. Further, the authors show how the different ways in which young people position themselves in their narratives correlate with the social actions they take in relation to their school-to-work trajectories. Specifically, findings document that narrators expressing a greater

sense of agency at the age of 18 have a higher probability of being in employment and/or enrolled in education when they turn 20. In this way, the DSG methodology opens up possibilities for systematic analyses of the relationship between patterns in people's narratives and specific outcomes in their life courses.

Narrative methods, with a focus on formal and universal elements, are both deeply humanist and can be operationalized at a larger scale utilising measurement and the authority of statistical significance. It is to this interplay that the fourth paper by Jeanette Østergaard and Rachel Thomson makes a contribution, by asking us to think in terms of narrative logics (shaped by sequence and specificity) and variable logics (shaped by abstraction and relationality). The authors suggest that these two logics can be at play in either quantitative or qualitative analyses. Working with a longitudinal data set from a study on young adult Danes' transitions to adulthood that has both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, this paper reveals gaps in each logic but also suggests how they may be used together. Specifically, the close reading delivered by qualitative, narratively driven case histories can be productively complemented by the distant readings facilitated by large-scale data sets to create synergies. The analysis provides insights into the 'black box' of causality set up in a variable-oriented quantitative analysis, helping us understand the contingencies and narrative work involved in creating a particular outcome. The case study material retains the 'smell of the real' (Cooper 2009) that preoccupied Pearce and colleagues as well as bearing the hallmarks of ethical hesitancy championed by Esin & Lounasmaa. Shifting metaphors, Østergaard and Thomson liken their case study protagonist to a butterfly caught in net through a sampling strategy shaped by variables. Asking why and how this 'butterfly' was caught in a particular 'net' (manifested in a cell in a two-way table) sheds light on both the similarities between different butterflies/individual cases and the wider social conditions that have shaped their trajectories. However, it is in understanding the unique route taken by a single butterfly that we gain insights that are simultaneously particular and universal in narrative terms.

The last two papers in this collection are again different in tone and approach. Both of these originate from outside the sociological tradition of narrative research and 'look in' through the window that narrative as a boundary object creates. The fifth paper, by literary scholars Samuli Björninen, Mari Hatavara and Maria Mäkelä, brings together narratology and social science research through a study of political storytelling in Finland. More specifically, the authors combine the narratological concepts of story (what happened) and discourse (how it is told) with positioning theory as formulated by Bamberg (1997) to enable an analysis of socially situated storytelling. From a narratological perspective, narrative *is* social action. When politicians use storytelling, and in particular the stories of others, to promote their particular political agenda, they are acting *on* the future as they seek to influence voters' actions *in* the future. However, this also raises a set of ethical questions regarding ownership and authenticity, which mirrors some of the concerns in the contributions by Peirce and colleagues and by Esin and Lounasmaa. How to determine the ownership of stories in research, in activism and in politics (see also Shuman 2005)? Going back to the analysis by Andrade & Andersen, where social inequalities were seen as conditioning narrative, this paper suggests that other power differentials might also require our attention: Whose stories are seen as valuable, useful or perhaps as co-optable? The social value of stories and status of storytellers –



whoever they are determined to be – effect its capacity to affect the future. Finally, the authors end on a somewhat pessimistic note as they remind us of the power *of* stories, in this case not so much for the therapeutic purposes that are indicated in the work of Peirce and colleagues but for political gain in a ‘post-factual’ era.

We end the collection with a paper that helps us reflect on what future action *is* and how we can investigate this empirically. Anneke Sools writes from the interdisciplinary field of future studies, an arena of intense activity in which academic research ranges from brain science (the physiological expressions of engaging with the unknown) to the study of science fiction narratives (a history of imagining that bears the traces of changing presents). From this perspective, ‘action’ itself again takes on different meanings as we are here not only engaging with the actions of research participants, but also action in the form of therapeutic and pedagogic interventions and action research. Sools writes about a prospective turn in research methodology, which includes her chosen research method of asking research participants to write a letter from an imagined future of their own choice. In the paper she explores the analytical potentials of these letters in her own research. Sools’ commitment to moving between psychological and sociological paradigms enables us to see how profoundly different our positions around method can be. On the psychology side we have a commitment to measurement as a means of building knowledge (however speculative) about how humans do the work of projection into unknown futures. On the other hand we find sociologists using the same texts as a route into the wider culture and into theory building about dynamic, yet resilient social structures and processes that scaffold this future. Sools recognises the ‘utility’ of future-oriented methodologies, available to us for therapeutic and political work, but also as techniques of the self that can glean value from our anxieties about uncertain futures.

In closing, we wish to highlight the diversity of the contributions in this Special Issue, and the multiple interpretations of both ‘narrative’ and ‘action’ that have come to the fore. Working together, with narrative as our boundary object, has enabled us and the contributors to develop new insights, approaches and methods that add to the literature on narrative and prospective social action. We have moved between close and distant readings of interview material, scaling narratives and narrative analysis up and down. The analyses in the papers have demonstrated the power of stories in not only imagining or narrating but also starting to craft futures, individual as well as collective. As these futures are increasingly precarious, the need for methodologies and methods that can unpack, scrutinise and engage with them is all the more clear. Importantly, the relationship between narrative and social action is not only the terrain of the academic researcher. In a political culture increasingly characterised by populism and ‘fake news’, the promotion of emotionally engaged ‘what if’ speculative thinking may be a critical practice of citizenship.

Our special issue comes together at a time where stories of climate change are calling individuals across the globe to gather, protest and demand political action. These events attest to the contemporary importance of world-wide, collective storytelling. As the quote prefacing this editorial points out, we each consider the question ‘What am I to do?’ by considering the kind of story we find ourselves in. If we find ourselves part of a dystopian story of irreversible climate breakdown will efforts to do anything appear futile? Will locating ourselves in a heroic story of global activism

fighting ‘big evils’ change our everyday behaviour? At the moment of writing this editorial, we know the horror stories about climate change that circulate worldwide. Time will tell how these influence prospective social action in our individual lives as well as collective futures.

We wish to end by thanking the reviewers who took out time to provide careful feedback on earlier versions of the articles in the Special Issue. All articles as well as this editorial have been through a thorough review process and we are grateful for the reviewers’ vital contributions.

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